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ABSTRACT

The relationship between perceived freedom and the attribution of attitudes was investigated. Observers were asked to infer an attitude from an actor's behavior when the actor's behavioral freedom was ambiguous. Attributions of attitude corresponded less to the behavior when it was unexpected and when the actor's potential lack of freedom was made salient. Results suggest that even though observers may generally overattribute an actor's behavior to an internal disposition of that actor, they are quite disposed to acknowledge potential situational or contextual variables to make the behavior more easily understandable. (Author)

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BEHAVIORAL EXPECTANCY, PERCEIVED FREEDOM
AND THE ATTRIBUTION OF ATTITUDES

by

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INTRODUCTION

Research in the area of attribution processes has demonstrated that the extent to which a behavior is perceived to reflect an internal disposition of an actor is positively related to the degree to which that behavior appears to be free of any outside influences (Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1971). However, even when potential constraints on an actor's behavior are made quite evident, observers continue to assume that the behavior of the actor reflects the actor's true inclinations. This tendency has been demonstrated empirically in a number of experiments (e.g. Jones & Harris, 1967; Schneider & Miller, 1975; Snyder and Jones, 1975; Miller, 1976). Ross (1977), in a review of attributional bias phenomena, has called this tendency on the part of observers the "fundamental attribution error".

Stimulus materials have commonly been in the form of an essay that has purportedly been written by an actor and observers are explicitly told whether or not the actor's behavior has been constrained in some manner. However, it should be recognized that in many cases information concerning an actor's behavioral freedom may not be directly available to an observer. If so, the observer may simply have to infer the extent of an actor's freedom, and such an inference may be at least partially based on the observer's prior knowledge of the actor.

Jones & McGillis (1976) believe that if an observer has firm prior knowledge about an actor and the actor engages in an unexpected behavior, the observer may attribute the behavior to aspects of the

situation rather than change any previous impression of that individual. This implies that there may be occasions where the observer may prefer not to attribute another's behavior to stable internal dispositions of that person.

The present study attempts to determine the effect of prior knowledge in the form of attitudinal similarity on attributions of attitude. Specifically, if we, as observers, perceive a great deal of similarity between ourselves and another person on most issues only to subsequently discover that we have discrepant opinions on a particular issue, we may attempt to minimize this discrepancy by searching for reasons which might indicate that the other person's stated opinion does not truly reflect that person's true beliefs. We may make an attribution about the cause of a behavior of someone who is perceived to be very unlike us in an analogous manner. If someone very dissimilar in attitudes subsequently agrees with us on a particular issue, we may have difficulty accepting this stated belief at face value. In fact we may tend to believe that such a statement must be a function of some type of outside influence. In each of the above cases we may search for ways to cognitively discount the actual behavior of another if that behavior is inconsistent with our prior expectations.

In previous research, observers have typically been provided with information concerning an actor's behavioral freedom. Thus the freedom purportedly given the actor has been manipulated by the experimenter. The present study focuses on the variable of perceived freedom as a dependent measure. There is some indication that the extremity of an attitude attribution varies with the perceived freedom for the actor. Miller (1974, 1976) has discovered, for example, that

not only is perceived freedom related to attributions of attitude but it is also related to the willingness of observers to make generalizations on the basis of a given behavior.

The purpose of the present study was to create a situation where the actor's behavioral freedom was ambiguous and to investigate whether the prior expectations of the observer about the actor's behavior would influence the perceived freedom for the actor and the observer's accompanying attributions. We predicted that when an actor's behavior is unexpected observers should be less likely to attribute the behavior to an internal disposition of the actor, particularly when they are explicitly instructed to consider the actor's potential lack of freedom prior to making their attributions. They should tend to attribute an unexpected behavior to the actor's lack of freedom thus discounting the information contained in the behavior. This tendency should be less pronounced when observers make their attributions immediately following the actor's behavior without being asked to first consider the actor's freedom. Since the behavioral freedom issue is not emphasized, the information contained in the actor's behavior should provide the main focus for observers regardless of any expectation.

The salience of the actor's freedom was also manipulated by varying the constraints placed upon the observer's own behavior. Jones and Snyder (1974) discovered that observers were still willing to make correspondent inferences on the basis of a low freedom behavior even when their own behavior had been similarly constrained. The authors allowed some subjects to freely choose an essay position while others were assigned a position to defend. Presumably, some subjects

in the no choice condition of the Jones and Snyder experiment were still able to write a proattitudinal essay even though they were assigned to defend a certain position. In such cases, the behavioral constraint manipulation may have been weak. Subjects were instructed to write essays in the present study as well. However, those subjects who were assigned an essay position were each required to write a counterattitudinal essay, thus maximizing behavioral constraint. We predicted that those observers whose own behavior had been severely constrained would be less likely to make extreme attitude attributions on the basis of another's behavior.

In brief, this investigation was concerned with a number of variables which might contribute to attributions of attitude. First, what types of attributions does an observer make in the face of evidence that either confirms or disconfirms a prior expectation? Second, what is the relationship between perceived freedom and the attribution of attitudes? Third, can the salience of an actor's freedom be manipulated in such a way so as to reduce the likelihood that an observer will make a strong correspondent inference based upon the actor's behavior, either by subtly reminding the observer of possible constraints on the actor's behavior or by placing constraints upon the observer's own behavior?

METHOD

Subjects. A total of 160 subjects were selected from the subject pool of the Psychology department at Miami University; 10 subjects were randomly assigned to each of 16 experimental conditions. Subjects were run in groups ranging in size from 6 to 10 individuals per group.

Conditions varied within each session.

Procedure. All subjects were initially told that during the experiment they would be required to write an essay and that some subjects would be given more freedom to express their own beliefs than others. First, a 25-item attitude questionnaire was distributed, including an item measuring attitudes toward abortion. For each item, subjects were instructed to indicate which of six possible alternative statements most closely reflected their own point of view. After completing the questionnaire, all subjects were required to write an essay on the topic of abortion. Half of the subjects were free to take either side of the issue. The remaining subjects were assigned a position to defend. Since the item concerning the abortion issue was located on the first page of the attitude questionnaire, the responses of the subjects could be easily seen by the experimenter. Therefore written instructions for writing the essay were distributed in such a way that subjects in the assign condition were required to write a counter-attitudinal essay. Subjects were given approximately twenty to twenty-five minutes to complete their essays. During this time the first experimenter unobtrusively left the room and administered a similarity manipulation based on subjects' responses to the attitude questionnaire. After everyone had finished writing, subjects were asked to indicate how much freedom they felt to state their own beliefs when writing their essays and to indicate how closely the content of their essay reflected their own point of view. These measures provided a check on the subject constraint manipulation. Subjects were then asked to form an impression of another individual based upon that person's responses to a portion of the attitude questionnaire which

they themselves had filled out earlier in the session. Subjects in the high similarity condition received a questionnaire which contained responses very similar to their own while subjects in the low similarity condition received a questionnaire containing responses very dissimilar to their own. After studying these responses, subjects were asked to read an essay on abortion that this person had purportedly written earlier. Half of the subjects were given an essay which took a position in the same direction as their own as indicated by their response to the abortion item on the attitude questionnaire. The remaining subjects received an essay which took a position toward abortion opposite to their own viewpoint. All subjects were asked to indicate the degree of similarity between the essay content and their own point of view. This provided a check on the essay congruence manipulation.

Subjects were asked to estimate the target person's deepest or most personal belief toward the abortion issue on a scale from -5 (strongly opposed to abortion) to +5 (strongly in favor of abortion). They were also asked to estimate how much freedom the target person felt when writing the essay on a scale from -5 (complete lack of freedom) to +5 (complete freedom). Half of the subjects made their attribution of attitude immediately after reading the essay and half responded to the measure of perceived freedom prior to making their attribution.

Subjects also rated the essay in terms of its quality, convincingness, and validity of its arguments. They then responded to ten additional attitude items as they believed the writer of the essay would have responded to them. The subjects themselves had responded

to these same items earlier. A disparity index was calculated by first measuring the absolute difference between a subject's own choice out of the six listed alternatives and the predicted response for the target person for a given item. These ten scores were then summed together to provide an overall disparity measure. The subjects also filled out Byrne's Interpersonal Judgment Scale. Those items relating to interpersonal attraction were of particular interest. The participants were asked to what degree they would like the target person and to what degree they would enjoy working with this person in an experiment. Finally, all subjects were given the opportunity to freely explain their reasoning as they responded to the various items. At the conclusion of the experiment each subject was thanked for his or her participation in the research project.

Design. The study consisted of a 2 (subject's freedom when writing own essay; free choice vs. assigned) X 2 (attitudinal similarity between subject and target person; high vs. low) X 2 (order of dependent measures; freedom item first vs. attribution item first) X 2 (congruence between essay content and subject's own beliefs; high vs. low) complete factorial with 10 subjects randomly assigned to each of the sixteen experimental conditions.

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks.

1. Subject constraint. Subjects in the choice condition felt more freedom when writing their essays than did subjects in the

assigned condition (CHOICE, $\bar{M} = 9.58$; ASSIGNED, $\bar{M} = 1.58$ ($F = 795.27$, $df = 1/144$, $p < .001$)), and also felt that their essay more closely reflected their own beliefs (CHOICE, $\bar{M} = 9.43$, ASSIGNED, $\bar{M} = 1.33$ ($F = 1052.68$, $df = 1/144$, $p < .001$)).

2. Attitudinal similarity. As predicted, subjects in the high similarity condition provided significantly lower disparity scores than those in the low similarity condition (HIGH SIM, $\bar{M} = 11.6$; LOW SIM, $\bar{M} = 17.7$ ($F = 63.78$, $df = 1/144$, $p < .01$)). Subjects' responses to the relevant items on the Interpersonal Judgment Scale indicate strong support for the effectiveness of the similarity manipulation as well. Those in the high similarity condition exhibited greater liking for the target person (HIGH SIM, $\bar{M} = 4.56$; LOW SIM, $\bar{M} = 3.30$ ($F = 60.28$, $df = 1/144$, $p < .01$)), and indicated more desire to work with this person in an experiment (HIGH SIM, $\bar{M} = 5.21$; LOW SIM, $\bar{M} = 4.25$ ($F = 32.24$, $df = 1/144$, $p < .01$)). These consistent differences provide rather convincing evidence for the effectiveness of the similarity manipulation.

3. Essay congruence. Subjects in the high congruence condition rated the target person's essay as more congruent with their own viewpoint than did subjects in the low congruence condition (HIGH CONG, $\bar{M} = 7.18$; LOW CONG, $\bar{M} = 3.06$ ($F = 64.21$, $df = 1/144$, $p < .01$)).

Attribution of Attitude

Because this investigation was not concerned with extremity of attitude attribution as a function of essay direction per se, responses for the two essays were made comparable by simply reversing the scale

when subjects were given an anti abortion essay to read. The -5 to +5 scale was also converted to a 0 to 10 scale with higher numbers indicating more extreme attitude attributions in the same direction as that indicated by the essay content.

The major finding is the three way interaction between attitude similarity, essay congruence, and order of dependent measures ($F = 4.83$, $df = 1/144$, $p < .05$, see Figure 1). A simple interaction effect between attitude similarity and essay congruence resulted when the attribution measure was preceded by the perceived freedom measure ($F = 13.38$, $p < .01$). Less extreme attributions were made when the essay content was unexpected given the previous information contained in the responses to the attitude questionnaire (i.e. similar target person writes low congruent essay or dissimilar target person writes high congruent essay) than when the content of the essay was expected (i.e. similar target person writes high congruent essay or dissimilar target person writes low congruent essay). This interaction was negligible, however, when the attribution measure preceded the perceived freedom measure ($F = 1$, $p = n.s.$). Instead more extreme attributions were made in the high congruence condition relative to the low congruence condition regardless of the previous attitudinal information.

The relationship between the perceived freedom for the essay writer and the accompanying attitude attribution was robust as indicated by the substantial correlation between the two measures ($r = .59$, $p < .001$).

The degree of constraint on subjects' own behaviors was unrelated to attributions of attitude. Although somewhat unexpected, this result

does amplify the previous findings of Jones and Snyder since the constraint factor in this particular study was especially severe.

Subsidiary Findings.

The essay congruence manipulation produced a number of predictable effects. A congruent essay was rated as more convincing (HIGH CONG, $\bar{M} = 7.25$; LOW CONG, $\bar{M} = 6.48$ ($F = 4.67$, $df = 1/144$, $p < .01$)) and more valid (HIGH CONG, $\bar{M} = 8.25$; LOW CONG, $\bar{M} = 7.29$ ($F = 11.20$, $df = 1/144$, $p < .01$)) than an incongruent essay. The writer of a congruent essay was also liked more than the writer of an incongruent essay as evidenced by responses to the relevant item on the Interpersonal Judgment Scale (HIGH CONG, $\bar{M} = 4.16$; LOW CONG, $\bar{M} = 3.70$ ($F = 9.14$, $df = 1/144$, $p < .01$)).

Subjects provided a variety of responses when given the opportunity to explain their reasoning as they dealt with the information provided. Of particular interest is the fact that 39.8% of those subjects in the high similarity condition mentioned the great similarity between the target person and themselves while only 10% of those subjects in the low similarity condition referred to the lack of similarity between the target person and themselves.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that observers may indeed discount the information contained in an actor's behavior when that behavior is unexpected, particularly when potential causes external to the actor (i.e. the actor's lack of freedom are made salient. When asked

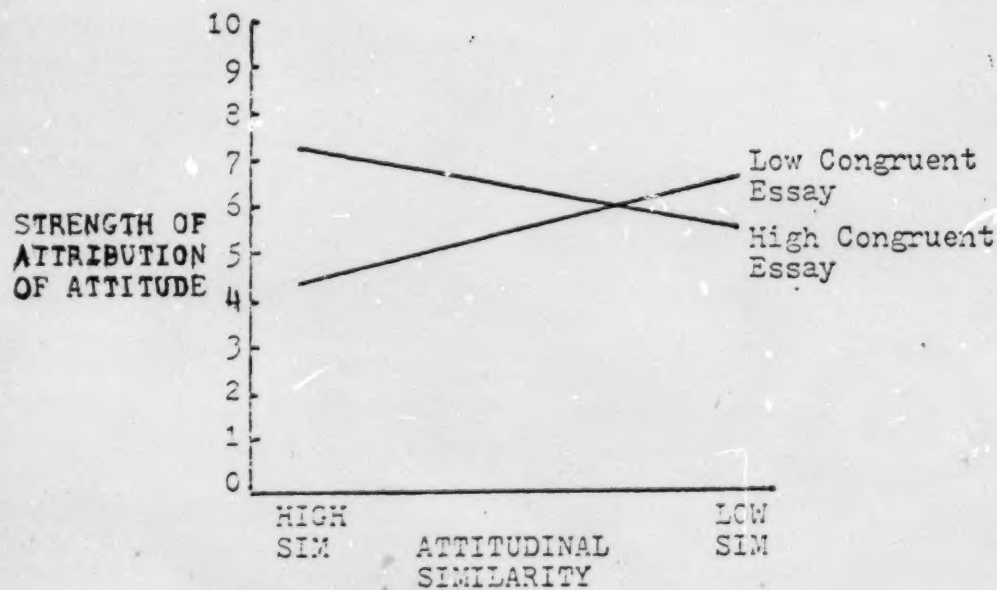
integrate diverse pieces of evidence regarding the attitudes and beliefs of others, observers appear to make an effort to infer at least some continuity in the behaviors of others.

In the context of the present experiment, attitude attributions were based upon two distinct pieces of information, (a) the content of an essay and (b) prior knowledge of the writer's attitudes toward a number of disparate issues. Although all subjects were initially informed that some essay writers would be given more freedom than others, the impact of this knowledge may have been accentuated for those observers who responded to the measure of perceived freedom prior to making an attribution. Once the freedom issue was emphasized, a lack of correspondence between essay content and prior expectation could be attributed to the writer's lack of freedom thus resulting in a less extreme attitude attribution. However, observers who were asked to make their attributions immediately after reading the essay may have focused instead upon the relationship between the content of the essay and their own viewpoint on that topic. The issue of the writer's freedom may not have been a primary concern since it was not raised in the interim between the reading of the essay and the making of an attribution. Because it is generally more rewarding to encounter information validating our own beliefs (Byrne, 1971), observers may have preferred to assume that the information contained in the essay truly reflected the writer's inclinations when that information was consistent with their own point of view. Therefore a high congruent essay received more extreme attributions than a low congruent essay regardless of any prior expectation.

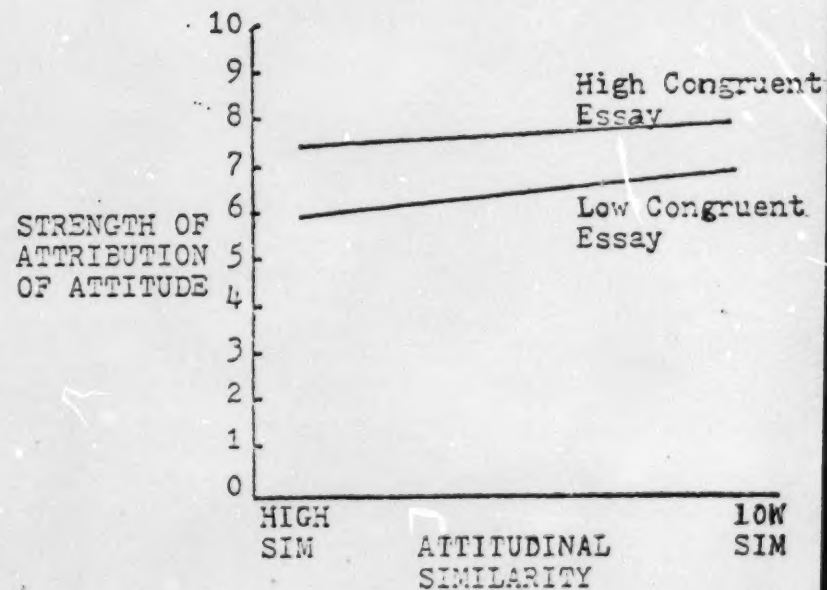
The three way interaction of attitude similarity, essay congruence, and order of presentation of dependent measures becomes interpretable within an information processing framework if one can assume that (a) observers who made their attributions immediately after they had read the essay were focusing upon the relationship between the essay content and their own beliefs, and that (b) observers who made their attributions after they had responded to the measure of perceived freedom were focusing upon the relationship between the essay content and their prior expectations.

Given this information processing perspective, the lack of an effect for situational constraint on the observer's own behavior is not surprising. Observers were apparently actively assimilating the information provided them rather than reflecting on the variables previously affecting their own behavior.

The attribution of attitudes is a cumulative process whose ultimate outcome evolves from the association of certain expectations with subsequent information which may be confirmatory or disconfirmatory in nature. Whatever the strategy adopted, observers appear to interpret the behavior of an actor in a way that is meaningful. Although observers may indeed persist in exhibiting "the fundamental attribution error", they are not ignorant of potential external reasons for an actor's behavior and they may use these reasons to explain that behavior when such reasons are salient and when they provide an intelligible rationale for an unexpected behavior.



PERCEIVED FREEDOM MEASURE 1ST



ATTRIBUTION MEASURE 1ST

Figure 1. Strength of attitude attribution as a function of attitudinal similarity, essay congruence, and order of dependent measures.

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